



**Economic Inequality in Suzanne Collins'
The Hunger Games: A Marxist Reading**

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Introduction

The Hunger Games is the first novel in a trilogy featuring the same title, published by author Suzanne Collins in 2008. It is a young adult dystopian novel set in the post-apocalyptic nation of Panem, built on what was formerly known as North America with references to "the Rockies" and "Appalachia" (50). The story of the novel centres around the protagonist Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen-year-old girl who volunteers for the annual Hunger Games, a competition in which children from all the districts of Panem must fight to the death in an arena until only one remains and a winner gets crowned. Upon its release, the novel spent over a hundred consecutive weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and its absolute success sparked the publication of two sequels and the creation of a critically acclaimed movie franchise (Levithan). In particular, the novel has received praise for the skilful exploration of themes of oppression, inequality, and survival to suit readers of a younger demographic (Ibid).

In this essay, I will explore the representation of economic inequality throughout the novel and examine how it has been conveyed to the reader. The purpose of this is to support my claim that a central reason for writing *The Hunger Games* was Collins' aspiration to raise awareness of and critique the ongoing and increasing economic inequality in the United States. My claim is founded on the fundamental premise that dystopian fiction, as a literary genre, is frequently utilized by authors as a tool for constructing analogies that draw parallels with similar issues in the real world. Furthermore, when interviewed, Collins has claimed her inspiration for the novel came from just-war theory, stating "[it defines] what circumstances give you the moral right to wage war and what is acceptable behaviour within that war ... [in *The Hunger Games*] the districts rebel against their own government because of its corruption" (Levithan). Thus, Collins has made it clear that her inspiration came from debating which circumstances give people the right to rebel, consequently planting the seed that the novel may be written as a warning of what could happen if the United States does not

actively work on resolving the issue of economic inequality within their society. Lastly, the mentions of North America in the novel further support my claim that this novel is critiquing how the US is currently handling economic imbalance amongst its citizens. While it is true that many of the critiques of a capitalistic society found within the novel are applicable to other Western capitalist societies, this essay will focus its analysis on the US. This approach is justified by the reasons mentioned previously, and it also facilitates a more targeted analysis of the societal issues and dynamics inherent within the American capitalist system.

In chapter 1, I will provide a brief summary of some of the novel's previous critical readings and explain how they differ from mine. Next, I will introduce Karl Marx's conflict theory as it will be the theoretical framework for my analysis, with specific attention paid to the class conflict between social groups and the necessity of revolution to create economic and political change. I will also provide an overview of the contextual backdrop to the novel's theme of economic inequality. This will be done by presenting empirical data on the escalating wage gap between different groups and providing examples of the consequences these increased financial differences have on living standards. In chapter 2, I will focus on the novel and use my theoretical framework to develop my analysis by, for instance, looking at the class conflict between the dominant capital, aptly named the Capitol, and the subordinate districts. I will also explore the novel's theme of rebellion and its portrayal of a totalitarian government. In summary, chapter 2 will combine information from both the literary novel and the preceding contextual chapter to strengthen my argument that it is a pointed critique of economic inequality in the US.

Chapter One – Marxism and Economic Inequality

In this chapter, I will provide background and introduce the socioeconomic theory that is relevant to my analysis. As *The Hunger Games* is a *New York Times* bestseller, the chapter will begin with a summary of some previous readings of the novel to explain how my reading differs from them. Furthermore, this chapter will include an explanation of Karl Marx's conflict theory as well as a description of the ongoing economic inequality in the United States. The information in this first chapter is crucial for understanding my reading of the novel.

1.1 Previous Research

The Hunger Games is a bestseller that quickly gained popularity and attracted plenty of readers upon its release. Whilst the novel's many diverse themes helped in finding a readership, it also generated a considerable number of critical readings and articles. One of the more condemnatory reviews came from a journal called *The ALAN Review*, with the writer, Margaret Godbey, arguing "that aspects of the text that fuel its popularity, the dynamics of reality television, the interruptions and silences of the first-person narrator, and the portrayal of gender also create a text that evokes that which it attempts to condemn" (15). Godbey points out the irony that a novel which aims to encourage social critique instead ends up becoming nothing more than entertainment to the reader. She writes that there are similarities between the Capitol viewers that are watching the Hunger Games and the readers because of "the plot [that] offers them the pleasures of reality television: commodity acquisition, sensational violence, and passive voyeurism: it's just a story—it has nothing to do with them" (18). Therefore, Godbey's article focuses on how the novel encourages readers to remain passive, pointing out the irony between its intention and subject.

In 2021, Veronika Němečková wrote in the article "Feminism in Suzanne Collins's Trilogy *The Hunger Games*" that "the role of men and women seems to be balanced" within the dystopian society, and therefore "we cannot talk about gender equality as both men and women take up the same roles" (20). Němečková's critical reading is conducted from a feminist perspective as it focuses on gender performance, the portrayal of femininity and masculinity, and the gender roles which society traditionally assigns to women. Němečková focuses on the portrayal of the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, as she writes:

Katniss Everdeen is an independent, strong, self-reliant character possessing both masculine and feminine qualities. Those qualities and the ways she performs them strongly rely on the influence of the society around her as it is the society that shapes her gender and gender performativity. She is the true embodiment of the third wave of feminism as she is the representative of an alternative social role of women as she is not fitting into a standardized gender role. (30)

According to Němečková, the novel's protagonist possesses both masculine and feminine qualities. She also mentions that Peeta Mellark, the deuteragonist, "rejects the traditional view of masculinity" (29). Thus, Němečková's focus on analysing the representation of gender in *The Hunger Games* ultimately leads her to conclude that gender inequality is not one of the novel's themes.

In "Consumed: Food in *The Hunger Games*" by Lori Parks and Jennifer Yamashiro, the main focus is on the symbolism of food in the novel. They argue that "food as a symbol ... is most representative of the power structure within Panem" (140), and Panem itself can be described as "a body, [with] the Capitol as the fetishized glossy surface, then the districts are

the disturbing interior, the abject" (147). According to Parks and Yamashiro, although the Capitol represents where the power and resources of Panem are centred, they are entirely dependent on the other districts' continued oppression to "sustain itself and its way of life" (139). Therefore, their article's main argument is that food works as a symbol of power in the novel, and it is often used to describe the relationship between different social classes.

Kristine Moffat and Melody May wrote in the journal *Mortality* in 2021 about how essential the "gladiatorial contest which is the Hunger Games" is to critique the "misuse of power by a corrupt government" (439). Contrary to Godbey's belief that the novel encourages readers to remain passive as its social critique ends up becoming nothing more than entertainment, Moffat and May claim that the deathly 'games' are vital to "heighten [the reader's] ethical awareness" (439). They do acknowledge some of the criticism that the novel has received for the depiction as they write:

We acknowledge that the tension between the Hunger Games as voyeuristic spectacle and as murder of innocents is never fully resolved, but argue that Collins' awareness of the cost and trauma of murder and war mitigate this seeming exploitation of human suffering. Our main focus is the fictional world Collins creates, where readers witness death at a remove, but the empathetic bond established between the protagonist and the reader and the intersection of the text with real-world contexts may also have the effect of confronting readers with their own mortality (441).

Additionally, the representation of death through the Hunger Games is valuable as it is a "symbol of the Capitol's power, and the parallel oppression and disfranchisement of the districts" (442), according to Moffat and May. Thus, this article defends the criticism of the

entertaining depiction of death in the novel and points out its necessity to evoke ethical awareness and social critique among the readers.

My reading will focus on the economic inequality represented in *The Hunger Games*, not discuss the morality of its controversial plot and grim content as in the articles written by Godbey as well as Moffat and May. Furthermore, my reading differs from Němečková's as I will not analyse the portrayal of gender in the dystopian state of Panem. However, this essay will share similarities with Parks and Yamashiro's study as it will also briefly look at the symbolism of food and its connection to the distribution of power in the novel.

1.2 Conflict Theory and Class

Conflict theory, developed by Karl Marx in the mid-19th century, asserts that society is characterized by competition and perpetual conflict between social groups, driven by economic and material interests, which results in inequality (14). According to Marx and Engel's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, a capitalist society can be divided "into two great classes directly facing each other: [the bourgeoisie] and [the proletariat]" (15). The bourgeoisie is the dominant group, containing mainly capitalists, whilst the proletariat is the subordinate group, made up of the oppressed working class and the poor. Therefore, the rise of conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is, according to Marx and Engel, inevitable because of the unjust distribution of resources between the two groups.

Furthermore, Marx argues that the bourgeoisie controls the means of production, such as factories and machinery, and exploits the working class by paying them less than the value of their labour. In the book *Marxism*, Rupert Woodfin explains why the conflict between the groups grows as a consequence of attempts from the capitalists to increase the financial profit, writing "profit must come from variable capital" such as workers' wages and so, "the inevitable exploitation takes place ... and the worker puts more value into the commodity than

they are paid for" (54). Woodfin, when summing up the means capitalists use to make as much profit as possible, points out the importance of making workers more efficient (56). Woodfin writes, "[The] increase in the rate of surplus value will almost certainly result in an increase in the quantity of surplus value (profit), because fewer workers will be needed. They can be made redundant, their wages saved, the factory produces more goods in less time"(57). It is thus this mentioned exploitation of workers that creates a fundamental conflict between the groups because while the capitalists seek to maximize their profits, the workers seek fair wages and better working conditions. The different interests and access to resources is what eventually causes friction in society.

The strict concentration of capital will, according to the conflict theory, ultimately lead to a revolution as "the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more" (Marx & Engel 19), which triggers the development of "class consciousness", a term Marx used to explain the shared position of exploitation and alienation amongst workers (Woodfin 62). The idea of class consciousness is that once the proletariat realizes the ongoing alienation in a capitalist society, they will unite and overthrow the system, creating a new classless society (Woodfin 63). In his book *Elementary Social Theory Concepts*, Alexander Styhre raises criticism against Orthodox Marxism (e.g., communists) and Marxist activists that questioned whether class consciousness was possible to establish within the entire proletariat stratum as he writes:

This proposition, in turn, justified the doctrine that is certain intellectual elite, the literati and avant-garde activists, should be granted the authority to decide which policies benefit the majority. This conjecture gave rise to and propelled the authoritarian and disastrous communist political and economic systems. that

collapsed in Europe by the end of the 1980s, but whose consequences still linger on at a global scale. (40)

Styhre argues that the idea of a classless society is what caused the rise and inevitable fall of communism in Europe and that many of the countries that eventually transitioned to democracy and market economies still struggle with the aftermath of communism today (41). Furthermore, Styhre argues that there is an important lesson to learn from history, which is that "a society formally devoid of classes (say, North Korea) tends to amplify rather than eliminate struggle" (41). *The Hunger Games* seems to share Styhre's claim that an entirely classless is not the solution to economic inequality, but this topic will be addressed further in the essay.

According to conflict theory, once the proletariat reaches class consciousness, revolution is inevitable as the systematic inequality and inherent exploitation of workers need to be addressed (Woodfin 61). Marx argued that the bourgeoisie will always attempt to remain in control through various means, such as media and other institutions that promote their capitalistic interests and suppress dissent (Woodfin 65). In chapter 2, I will delve deeper into the usage of media and entertainment to uphold the capitalistic interests of the ruling class in Panem and in the United States. When the proletariat eventually gains class consciousness and understands to which extent they have been exploited, they will attempt to overthrow the bourgeoisie class as "the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains" (Marx & Engel 27). Therefore, according to Marx's conflict theory, revolution and changes within the political systems are often abrupt rather than gradual. Change is not driven by evolution but by conflict. The end goal of Marx's conflict theory is the establishment of a classless society in which social and economic inequality has been eliminated (Woodfin 112). Thus, the

fundamental conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat could only end once all resources were divided equally and all social classes ceased to exist.

In summary, the conflict theory states that society is in perpetual conflict because of the uneven distribution of basic resources between social classes. The capitalists will attempt to maintain the unequal distribution of power and resources by ideological coercion and continued oppression, but once the working class reaches class consciousness, revolution is inevitable. This theory highlights the necessity of conflict for societal change, with the ultimate goal being a completely classless society. The conflict theory will be used as the framework for my analysis of *The Hunger Games* in chapter 2 of this essay.

1.3 Economic Inequality in the United States

In chapter 2, I will maintain that the dystopian society of Panem in the novel *The Hunger Games* is an amplified depiction of American society, created to raise awareness of the country's increasing economic inequality. Therefore, to enrich the comprehensiveness of my examples and analysis of the novel later in this essay, I will provide some background and information regarding economic inequality in the US.

Since the 1970s, the US has experienced a persistent and staggering rise in economic inequality, and there is little indication that this trend will abate in the near future (Da-Costa Aboagye 180). The greatest concentration of wealth exists at the very top of the economic spectrum as "the top 1% earners who contributed to 10% of the U.S. national income in 1980 increased to 20% in 2016, the bottom 50% earners who contributed to 20% of national income in 1980 decreased to 13% in 2016" (Ibid 180). In an article in *Council on Foreign Relations*, Anshu Siripurapu argues that the growth of economic inequality in the US is due to a number of reasons, including increased monopolization, the decline of unions, technological change, and a changing tax policy. The US is a capitalist society reliant on competitive

markets to allocate resources, which in theory should lead to economic growth for all social classes, but instead has led to growing economic inequality, according to Siripurapu.

Consequently, one could conclude that the increasing economic disparity has also resulted in larger differences in the quality of life among American citizens.

Productivity amongst workers has increased 64.6% from 1979 to 2021 as a consequence of technology development and workers' performance becoming more efficient, whilst the workers' hourly compensation has essentially flatlined, only increasing just 17.3% during the same time period (Institute for Policy Studies). The observation that productivity exhibited a growth rate 3.7 times greater than workers' compensation can thus reflect Marx's conflict theory, which posits that capitalists have a fundamental inclination to maximize their profits, retaining any surplus for their own benefit. The decline in unionization is one of the reasons for the disconnect between productivity and wages (Siripurapu). Less than 11% of the American workforce is nowadays represented by an union, and the lack of collective bargaining power is especially noticeable as "those at the top of the income scale have increased their power to rig economic rules in their favor" (Institute for Policy Studies). Without unions, workers lose their collective bargaining tool and are consequently much more vulnerable to low wages, discrimination, and limited benefits (Siripurapu). Thus, the benefits of increased productivity have been enjoyed by the employer rather than the employees resulting in a widening economic inequality between the two groups.

The stagnation of workers' incomes in the US has led to an increase in the number of individuals who rely on government financial assistance, particularly among low-income households (Da-Costa Aboagye 186). For example, a report conducted by DeNavas-Walt et al. for The U.S. Census Bureau found that "10.5% of the U.S. population received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in 2019 ... [which is an increase] from 6.3% in 2000" (14). DeNavas-Walt et al. also found that 34.0% of the American

population participated in at least one means-tested program in 2019, which includes programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and Supplemental Security Income (11). In other words, more of the American population rely on government assistance today than they did historically. The majority of these government programs are primarily financed through tax revenues. In an article published in *The New York Times*, Eduardo Porter argues that these welfare programs have created a misplaced reliance on government support, therefore becoming “inefficient, expensive and ineffective in helping those in need” (The Inefficient Welfare State). Porter presents the issue of dependency on government, calling the welfare system a “tax-and-transfer economy in which the government collects from everybody to pay for the support of those who need it most” (Ibid). The different programs such as SNAP and Medicaid are all funded by tax revenues, but they are so narrowly targeted that many American citizens are denied help although they may need it which, according to Porter, creates incentive for people that seek assistance to use dishonest tactics. Furthermore, Porter argues that focusing on universal and broad-based programs, such as access to affordable healthcare and education, which would be available to everyone, could solve the problems surrounding the American welfare system.

The issue of economic inequality in the US has not only led to differences in wealth and income but has also contributed to growing social inequality, particularly in terms of access to basic resources such as food, education, and healthcare. In their book *Social Inequality*, Hurst et al. contend that the reason many people in the American middle- and lower class struggle with maintaining a good quality of life is because of the inverse relationship between stagnant wages and increased costs in social determinants of health (28). In contrast to Porter, Hurst et al. argue that the welfare system needs to be more efficient and selective with a targeted approach to address the issue of exploitation. They cite the prevalent American belief in freedom and individual responsibility but claim that “[most Americans] also feel that

governmental help should be given when opportunities for some are blocked and when others need help because of disabilities" (11). Their argument is built on equality of opportunity rather than equality of income, pointing out flaws in the current government programs, such as SNAP, that are based on outdated data on grocery costs resulting in low-income households living on unhealthy diets. Consequently, by distributing resources better and increasing taxes for the top percentile of earners, there would be a rise in equal opportunity without relying on private companies to raise wages. Thus, Hurst et al.'s main argument for decreasing economic inequality's impact on social inequality is to create equal opportunity for necessities such as food, education, and housing.

As a result of the economic changes and developments that I mentioned previously, the disparity among different social classes in the US has increased. The augmenting economic inequality has considerably contributed to a growing number of individuals becoming actively involved in the matter, advocating equal prospects for all. For example, following the fatal encounter in 2020 wherein a white American police officer used excessive force, which resulted in the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed African American man, the Black Lives Matter movement witnessed a notable surge in prominence within the United States (Barklie). One of the issues that the BLM movement brings attention to is how marginalized groups, like people of colour, are not only more likely to live in poverty, earn lower wages compared to white colleagues and be less likely to find employment, but they are also more likely to face harsher social problems, like police brutality (Ibid).

It is imperative to note that the problem of economic inequality extends beyond its origin and expands to create discrepancies in other areas of society. Consequently, those belonging in the working class have significant differences in their quality of life in comparison to those belonging in the upper class. Therefore, writers like Suzanne Collins, who do not typically integrate political or social discourses in their literary works, have arguably decided to raise

awareness of these issues in their fiction. With this as part of my background, I will move on to analyse the representation of economic inequality in *The Hunger Games* in chapter 2 and argue that the novel is a critique of this issue in the US.

In this chapter, I have explained the purpose of my analysis of *The Hunger Games* by presenting some previously published critical readings of the novel and explaining how mine differs from theirs. Following this, I introduced Marx's conflict theory, and its main argument that social and economic systems are characterized by a struggle between the ruling and the working class, as it forms the theoretical framework of my analysis. Lastly, I also provided an overview of the ongoing economic inequality in the US to contextualize my argument: the novel's author, Suzanne Collins, uses the fictionalized society of Panem to critique and raise awareness of the economic inequality in the US. This section has highlighted several key issues related to economic inequality, including the growing wage gap between different economic classes, the impact of technological development on workers' ability to negotiate, the absence of unionization, and the resulting social disparities in people's quality of life. In the next chapter, I will examine how the novel depicts economic inequality to raise awareness of this issue in the US today.

Chapter 2 – Economic Inequality in *The Hunger Games*

In the second chapter, I will use Marx's conflict theory as my framework and analyse relevant examples from *The Hunger Games* to illustrate the depiction of economic inequality within the novel and explain why it inevitably leads to a rebellion. Specifically, the chapter will delve into the dynamics of the citizens' relationship with the government, the stratification of society along different social classes, and the underlying rationales for the rebellion as articulated in the novel. These insights will support my argument that the novel serves as a pointed critique of economic inequality in the United States.

2.1 Government

The political regime portrayed in *The Hunger Games* is a totalitarian system led by the authoritarian leader President Snow, who maintains an iron grip on power through uncompromising control. To ensure that the people living in the outlying districts follow the orders and laws given to them by the government, President Snow, who resides in the Capitol, has instated multiple preemptive measures. For example, each of the districts is separated from each other and surrounding areas with "high chain-link [fences] topped with barbed-wire loops" (5). Those living in the districts are told that the fences are supposed to deter "the predators that live in the woods - packs of wild dogs, lone cougars, bears" (5), but as observed by the novel's protagonist, Katniss, the fences are also designed to stop people from leaving (99). When Katniss arrives at the Capitol, she recognizes a girl that serves them dinner. Haymitch, the only living victor from District 12 and Katniss' mentor ahead of the Hunger Games, explains that the girl she recognized is an Avox which is "someone who's committed a crime, a traitor" and has had their "tongue cut off [to stop them from speaking]" (94). Later on, when questioned again about her reaction towards the Avox girl, Katniss explains that she saw her running through the woods once whilst hunting beyond the fence. She recalls:

And then we saw her. I'm sure it was the same girl. A boy was with her. Their clothes were tattered. They had dark circles under their eyes from no sleep. They were running as if their lives depended on it. ... A hovercraft appeared out of nowhere. A net dropped down on the girl and carried her up. They shot some sort of spear through the boy. (100)

From a Marxist perspective, the Avoxes serve as an example of the exploitation of labour under capitalism, and I would argue that their characterization represents one of the most vulnerable groups of workers that exists in the US today: undocumented immigrants. The severed tongue is a symbol of the immigrant workers' inability to speak and seek assistance as their labour becomes exploited because their employers know that the fear of being deported is greater than the desire for fair compensation. Furthermore, the Avoxes' status as traitors, who are shunned from society, reflects the alienation that Marx concluded to be inherent in all capitalistic societies.

To prevent a potential uprising, Panem's government uses a combination of propaganda and fear to maintain the oppression and subsequent control of the outlying districts. In school, the children must listen to a "weekly lecture on the history of Panem [which is] mostly a lot of blather about what [everyone] owes the Capitol" (50), and every year the mayor reads "The Treaty of Treason", a document created by the Capitol to ensure peace and discourage thoughts regarding a rebellion (21). In addition to the propaganda, the government has also placed Peacekeepers in all the districts to ensure that their orders and laws are upheld. Just as the name suggests, the Peacekeepers' announced purpose is to maintain peace among the citizens of Panem, but in reality, their unofficial assignment is to silence the whispers of dissent. As the novel's story develops, Katniss discovers that the Peacekeepers are allowed to

use as much violence as they want to without facing repercussions from their employer, the government. In District 12, Katniss' home, the Peacekeepers often buy goods at the illegal market (13), whereas those stationed in District 11 usually order "public whippings" if they catch someone engaging in unlawful acts (245). The Peacekeepers in the novel could be compared to the American police as they share the task of enforcing the law. Similarly to the Peacekeepers, as mentioned previously, the police in the United States have also received criticism from the public for using intimidation and excessive violence to maintain control over marginalized communities, specifically against people of colour, as in the murder of George Floyd (Barklie). According to Marx, the similarities are not surprising as intimidation and violence are frequent practices in capitalistic societies, encouraged and funded by the state, as they serve to maintain power.

The ultimate display of the government's authority and power comes in the shape of the Hunger Games, a televised competition where everyone must watch one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen from their districts fight to the death until only one tribute remains and gets crowned that year's winner. According to Katniss, the message of the Games is clear "Look at how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you" (22). The Games are, as most things in Panem, heavily censored, out of concern that they could create unity among the oppressed districts and fuel anti-government sentiment. For instance, after Katniss encounters Rue, a young tribute from District 11, she remarks, "It's interesting, hearing about her life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation" (246). She knows that moments of camaraderie and innocent talks about their lives are deemed dangerous by the government as they could spark an uprising.

Marx believed that similar examples as the one described above are customary in capitalistic societies as the bourgeoisie will always attempt to remain in control through various means, such as the media, to suppress dissent and allow their capitalistic interests to continue unthreatened. In the United States, the media is not directly controlled by the government, but, as a report conducted by DeNavas-Walt et al. for The U.S. Census Bureau found, many American citizens depend on government assistance today (11), rendering them vulnerable and cautious of expressing criticism against the government. The dependence on government aid creates a sense of apprehension among individuals about criticizing the government. Therefore, while the censorship in media is not comparable between the novel's fictional society of Panem and the US, there are similarities in the individual's dependence on the government.

2.2 Class Conflict

Initially, Panem, the fictional dystopian state and setting of *The Hunger Games*, appear to be divided into a dualistic social hierarchy: the dominant group living in the Capitol and the subordinate group living spread out in the twelve outlying districts. It becomes evident early in the novel that there is a divide between the two groups, with the protagonist, Katniss, noting that "the rules [they had to live by] were set up by the Capitol, not the districts" (16). Additionally, Katniss reveals that the different districts serve as sources of resources and labour for the Capitol, with hers, the 12th district, "[supplying] coal" (50). Similar to the contemporary American context, where each individual's economic and social prospects are controlled by the environment in which they grow up and reside, the novel's depiction of different districts highlights the profound impact of residence on one's opportunities. Usually, tributes from either District 1, 2 or 4 are the winners of the Hunger Games as they are "the ones that have been fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment" and have

accordingly gotten named "the Careers" (115). Although Katniss does express envy of the tributes from these districts (219), she recognizes that their resources and labour are also exploited by the Capitol (80). I, therefore, agree with the claim Parks and Yamashiro made in their critical reading when they wrote that the Capitol is the "fetishized glossy surface [of a body]" whilst the districts "are the disturbing interior" (Parks & Yamashiro 147), or in other words, the districts work so the Capitol can enjoy the districts' hard labour. There is an unjust distribution of capital, with most of Panem's resources being supplied to a heavily concentrated portion of the population at the Capitol whilst those in most districts are left to "starve" (34), and following Marx's conflict theory, it is thus understandable that Panem has faced a rebellion before. The story of this novel plays out 74 years after the Dark Days, a failed attempt of rebellion against the Capitol, which left twelve districts defeated and the thirteenth seemingly obliterated. Therefore, it is understood that the districts allow their oppression to continue as they fear their chances of surviving another uprising.

Beyond serving as a stark reminder to the citizens of Panem of the government's authority, the Hunger Games are also seen as a festivity and are designed to cater to the amusement of the wealthy inhabitants of the Capitol. For example, one year, many tributes froze to death as the arena they fought in was not equipped with wood to make fires, but because the "quiet, bloodless deaths" were considered "anticlimactic" to viewers (48), the Gamemakers have made sure to provide wood since. Tributes get assigned mentors ahead of the Hunger Games, and their mission is to make the tributes as charming and entertaining as possible to win the hearts of the wealthy viewers. It is a crucial part of survival to come across as likeable because the people watching the Games can choose to sponsor their favourite tribute: and it does not come cheap, especially not at the end of the Games as "Gifts go up in price the longer the Games continue. What buys a full meal on day one buys a cracker on day twelve" (322). When Katniss is in the arena, she quickly figures out that the best way to receive the

viewers' affection is to capitalise on her fake romantic relationship with Peeta, the story's deuteragonist and District 12's male tribute. She realises that "one kiss equals one pot of broth" after being rewarded with some food following a kiss between the pair (360), so she continues playing up their romance with kisses, deep conversations, and confessions of love, which proves to be a winning concept as she receives full meals and medicine even at the end of the Games (365). In Godbey's review of *The Hunger Games*, she writes that there are similarities between those in the Capitol of Panem viewing the Hunger Games and those reading the novel as "the plot offers them the pleasures of reality television" (18), and I partially agree with her conclusion. A real-time, televised show filled with drama and competition is not a new concept to TV, it is arguably a literal description of American reality shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. From a Marxist perspective, it is simple: production companies seek out people from the working class to compete in their shows and provide entertainment to viewers, and the contestants agree to this in an attempt to win a cash prize.

Although American reality shows lack the utter brutality of the Games as portrayed in the novel, I would argue that the exploitation of its working-class citizens is the same as in Panem. Given the commercial success of this bestselling novel and the popularity of reality television, Godbey has a relevant point when she compares the two, writing that "popular responses to the Hunger Games suggest that many readers do not interrogate the text (...) [and they] do not question the similarities between American entertainment culture and the culture of Panem" (16). In the end, it is arguably all the same: people from the districts are used to provide entertainment and benefit the ruling class of Panem, whilst people from the American working class are used by production companies to financially benefit them and provide entertainment to an audience that can laugh at the desperation and antics of those on their TV screens.

Beneath the polished surface of the class conflict between the Capitol and the districts, there is a much more multifaceted system of social stratification. When the male tribute from the 12th district, Peeta Mellark, is introduced, the novel's protagonist, Katniss, immediately recognizes him from a selfless act he did years prior, when he "[tossed] two loaves of bread" at her starving frame (37). He did this although his mother had yelled about "how sick she was of having ... brats from the Seam pawing through her rubbish" (35) minutes prior, and despite the two of them not knowing each other as "he stuck with the town kids, so how would [they?]" (36). Even though both characters live in the same district, they evidently belong to different social classes. According to present-day socio-economic classifications, Katniss is a part of the lower class as she resides in the Seam with her family.

Peeta, on the other hand, lives in his family's bakery in the town centre, where all merchants live, making him a member of the middle class. Analogous to the observed trend in contemporary America, the literary portrayal of the differences and similarities between the Seam and the merchant area in the novel indicates a narrowing of the gap between the lower- and middle class. For example, when Katniss and Peeta eat their first extravagant meal on the train to the Capitol after they have been confirmed as District 12's tributes, it is noted that "once the meal is over ... [they both look] a little green" (54). Later on, they are both also equally astonished at the food that is offered at breakfast, with Peeta telling Katniss, "They call it hot chocolate ... it's good" (67). I would claim that this suggests that the gap between the novel's lower and middle class is much smaller than the one to the upper class living in the Capitol, similar to what was mentioned earlier in this essay regarding the United States' class stratification.

However, it appears that when faced with starvation, it is much easier to see the differences rather than similarities, as there is obvious tension between the different socio-economic classes within the districts too. A clear example of this is when Katniss and her

friend Gale, who also lives in the Seam, go to sell the strawberries that they have foraged to the mayor's granddaughter. Gale makes a dig at Madge, the granddaughter, when she expresses fear over the oncoming reaping, the event where the tributes for the Hunger Games get selected. Children between the ages of twelve and eighteen have their names entered once more for each year they age; however, everyone can choose to enter their name more times in exchange for tesserae, a form of voluntary food rationing consisting of a year's supply of grain and oil for a person. This makes the reaping system unfair, as the poorest are also the most vulnerable and at risk of getting chosen. Katniss explains:

Gale knows his anger at Madge is misdirected. On other days, deep inside the woods, I've listened to him rant about how the tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in our district. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper; and thereby ensure we will never trust one another. (16)

In this scene, Gale and Katniss are essentially recognizing and agreeing with Marx's theory that the capitalist elite will try to create division amongst workers to maintain power and allow their dominance to continue unnoticed. Katniss goes as far as saying, "It's not that I don't agree with him. I do", but then questions whether their rage would achieve any change, "But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill our stomachs" (17). I would suggest that Katniss and Gale have already reached class consciousness at this point in the story, as they are aware that government ruling in the Capitol is trying to cause friction between the people in the districts. However, in the beginning of the novel, the uncertainty regarding the degree of support that a potential uprising might garner from the masses hinders Katniss from taking

proactive measures. Nonetheless, I will now examine the underlying reasons that ultimately lead to a rebellion.

2.3 Rebellion

It becomes evident early in the novel that the perpetual conflict between the bourgeoisie residing in the Capitol and the proletariat residing in the outlying districts has reached a critical juncture. The proletariat, who appears to possess a heightened class consciousness, are on the cusp of a rebellion, with only the signal of something, or someone, required to start a revolution. After Katniss volunteers at the reaping, taking her sister's place at the Games, a presenter encourages the people of District 12 to applaud but "to [their] everlasting credit, not one person claps" (28). Their silence is a protest, and Katniss acknowledges this, "They take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong" (29). Then, all of the people in their crowd hold up three of their fingers in an old gesture, which essentially means having respect for someone, and as Katniss herself concludes, ever since she stepped up to take her sister's place, it seems like "a shift has occurred" (29). The novel illustrates the importance of unity among the working class and the transforming power of collective action. Following Katniss' selfless act, the masses displayed symbolic support for her, reflecting a changing class consciousness and growing discontent with the status quo of their society. This emphasis on collective action and solidarity proves the centrality of unionization as a strategy for empowering the working class and their fight for rights. Therefore, I would claim that the novel serves as a call to action for American citizens to join unions and promote collective bargaining as a means of challenging structural inequalities.

Katniss herself also takes a more proactive approach to rebellion by defying the ruling class's twisted notion and requirement of entertainment in the Hunger Games. As mentioned

previously, while in the arena Katniss forms a bond with Rue, a younger tribute from District 11, and later on, they collaborate on a plan to destroy the Careers' food supply. Unfortunately, their mission requires them to go their separate ways for a while, and once Katniss finds her friend again, it is only to discover Rue with a "spearhead buried up to the shaft of her stomach" (282). Instantly, Katniss shoots an arrow and kills the boy from District 1 that is responsible for throwing the spear that killed her friend, but she does not blame him, saying,

To hate the boy from District 1, who also seems so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us. Gale's voice is in my head. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. ... I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own (286).

I would claim that it is at this specific point in the novel that Katniss' class consciousness reaches a heightened level where she not only recognizes the oppressive nature of the Capitol but also becomes ready to take action against it.

Following a makeshift funeral where Katniss covers Rue's body in flowers, she triumphantly considers that when collecting Rue's body, the Gamemakers have to display her work to all the people watching the Hunger Games (287). The display of solidarity and humanity between Katniss and Rue transcends the Capitol's attempts to divide the districts and reinforces Marx's idea of the proletariat's collective struggle against the bourgeoisie. Katniss' act of defiance is notably supported by the masses as she receives a "portion of warm

bread" sponsored by the working class from District 11 (289). This gesture demonstrates the fundamental principle of Marxism, which is that the working class can only succeed in their struggle by standing together and supporting each other. This section and its subject of solidarity are relevant in the US today, where deep-seated socioeconomic disparities persist. It stresses the need for collective mobilization to achieve meaningful change as well as encourages readers to understand the significance of unity to overthrow systematic oppression that, for example, has facilitated the top 1% earners who contributed to 10% of the U.S. national income in 1980 to double their contribution by 2016 (Da-Costa Aboagye 180).

Throughout the novel, there are various instances of defiance. However, I would argue that the pivotal moment for rebellion, the act that sets the ball of an uprising in motion, occurs in the final pages of the novel when Katniss and Peeta agree to a joint suicide, by eating poisonous berries, thereby outsmarting the Gamemakers and their expectation of having a sole victor. Halfway through the Games, they announce a revision to the rules that would allow for two victors, given that the last people standing come from the same district, but after Katniss and Peeta kill the only other tribute left, a Career from District 2, the revision is revoked. Katniss realises that "they have to have a victor" (417), so she asks Peeta to eat the poisonous berries with her, knowing that the Gamemakers will have no choice but to announce them both as winners: and she is correct. However, Katniss' joy and satisfaction are short-lived as she soon realises that "the Games are not quite finished" (432). Now awaits repercussions from those ruling in the Capitol because if they allowed a young woman to get away with multiple acts of defiance, the masses might take that as inspiration and start an uprising. However, as Marx believed, once the working class reaches class consciousness, revolution is inevitable, regardless of continued attempts of oppression from the ruling class.

In line with conflict theory, the sequels to *The Hunger Games* depicts a brutal uprising, with Katniss becoming the face of the rebellion. Overall, I would claim that *The Hunger*

Games can be viewed as a cautionary tale and a call to action for American readers to start recognizing and resisting the oppression that allows economic inequality to continue unchallenged. I base this claim on the many mentions of class, government, and rebellion, which all connects to the conflict theory. While it would be excessive to claim that the novel promotes all of Marx's beliefs, for example, an entirely classless society, it would arguably also be injudicious to ignore its calls for collective action and critique of the contemporary American socioeconomic structures.

In conclusion, this second chapter has analysed the depiction of government, social class stratification, and acts of rebellion in the dystopian society of Panem. With Marx's conflict theory as my frame of reference, it is possible to interpret the novel as a warning about the potential consequences of increasing economic inequality in a capitalist society. This reading suggests that the multiple examples of change occurring in relation to collective action is meant to encourage the American working class to unite.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored the theme of economic inequality in Suzanne Collins' novel *The Hunger Games* and argued that it serves as a critique of the oppressive nature of the United States' capitalistic society. My claim has been that Collins has exaggerated capitalism and its deep-rooted issues in the dystopian society of Panem to explain and emphasize the danger of allowing class divisions to increase without having proper systems set up to close that gap, therefore failing to enable equal opportunity for all.

I chose to use Marx's conflict theory as the foundation for my analysis as it seems fruitful as the theoretical background for the novel's depiction of a capitalist society. Following Marx's theory, *The Hunger Games* portrays a society in which the ruling class residing in the Capitol maintain their power through exploitation, intimidation, and by pitting the working class that lives in outlying districts against each other to capitalise on their alienation.

However, through acts of solidarity and resistance, the masses and the story's protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, heighten their class consciousness and are consequently able to challenge this oppression and start an uprising against the government. Specifically, the novel stresses the importance of collective action to achieve change, and in a sense, it practically begs readers to question the reasons for socioeconomic issues in their own environment. Although my reading focuses on the novel's analogies to the contemporary United States, many of its reflections are arguably relevant to all Western capitalist societies.

While it would be excessive to claim that the novel approves of and promotes all of Marx's beliefs, for example an entirely classless society, it is of interest to acknowledge its critique of the United States' socioeconomic structure. The novel calls out the falsehood of the American Dream, hinting that in a capitalistic society where the ruling class rigs the system to oppress those belonging to the working class, social mobility is practically impossible and not simply achievable through hard work, as the phrase states.

An example from the second chapter, when Katniss describes the unfair reaping system as children can choose to have their names entered more times for the Games in exchange for tesserae, or what people know as food stamps in the US, illustrates that the system in a capitalist society is first and foremost designed to benefit the ruling class. The working class is expected to be content with providing labour, and sometimes entertainment in televised shows like the Hunger Games or *Big Brother*. As believed by Marx, and hinted at in this novel, the only way to challenge economic inequality and widening wealth gaps is to take action and fight against policies that inhibit social mobility. *The Hunger Games* should be viewed as a cautionary tale of what the United States could look like in the future, if people allow the current development of economic inequality to continue uncontrolled.

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